

Conference Paper

Psychological Mechanisms of Cultural, Clinical and Individual Transformations of Mentalization

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Abstract

The subject of theoretical revision is the impairment of social cognition, which is well-known in the clinics of borderline personality disorders. Mentalization is understood as a form of social cognition, which allows to perceive, imagine and emotionally relate, make sense and causality of what's happening in a subjective world – of self and another person. Mentalization supposes integration of contextual factors, material and physical aspects of situation and behavior, as well as inner subjective feelings, beliefs, goals and intentional states as representative motives for a given behavior. In the perspective of the cultural-historical theory and methodology by L.S. Vygotsky a new interpretation is offered for the clinical phenomena of mentalization deficit, an understanding is given for transformation of its structure and functions as a consequence of the person's loss of interpsychic social connections and disintegration of intrapsychic organization of consciousness, impairment of its systemic structure, narrowing and simplification of cross-functional bonds and intrapsychic "mythology". In the result of this double destruction of bonds, ontogenetically early and primitive forms of mentalization are «splitting off», isolated and start holding a domineering position in psychic functioning. The process of mentalization regresses to its pre-categorical and cognitive-affective non-differentiated levels and structures (syncretic and complex organization), unfolding involuntarily and unconsciously, lacking meaningful coherence, symbolic mediation and focus for understanding the subjective world – of self and the Other. The unconscious substitution of the psychic picture of the inner world with impulsive actions, hypochondriac and narcissistic fixations, autistic pseudo-mentalization and manipulation is lacking the meaningful and sanguineous dialogue with the Other. The loss of social connections (interpsychic communication), without being mediated by the addressed to the Other speech-dialogue is interiorized into the inner "muteness" – the loss of not only understanding of others, but the interruption of meaningful inner and "worded" dialogue with the self, self-understanding.

Keywords: mentalization disorders, cultural-historical approach, structure-functional disorganization.

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1. Introduction

Ability of a person to consider one's Self and the world of subjectivity of the Other as subjects of inquiry implies an intricate interplay and interweaving of emotional and reflexive processes, demands flexible decentering the Self to a position of an imaginable other person, which is attainable only in the interpersonal communication, open for the dialogue-meeting with the Other as a human being possessing equal values and rights. The space between the Self and the Other, the space of the joint and shared intersubjectivity and "collective intentionality" is viewed as a "place", where the "triangular" process of production of mutual mental representations unfolds [1].

Mental representation, or mentalization, as defined by a British psychoanalyst Peter Fonagy, is understood as a form of social cognition, which allows perceiving, imagining, emotionally relating, making sense and seeing causality in something taking place in one's own and other person's subjective world. Mentalization implies integration of contextual factors, material and physical aspects of situation and behavior, as well as inner subjective feelings, beliefs, goals and intentional states as representative incentives of various behaviors [2].

2. Methodology

According to the genetic method developed in the cultural-historical theory, we understand mentalization impairment as a consequence of "regress" in systemic organization of its microstructure and functions [3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 9]. Ontogenetically preceding, early and primitive forms of mentalizations "split out", isolate themselves and start to dominate in psychic functioning, while the process of mentalization itself regresses to its pre-categorical levels, unfolding involuntarily and unconsciously. Such phenomena are seen in altered states of consciousness, after severe psychic traumas, in personality disorders.

3. Results

3.1. Pre-categorical forms of subjectivity as a result of collapse of categorical mediation and “simplification” of structural organization of consciousness

The most prominent features of the form of mentalization deficit, which P. Fonagy calls “*psychic equivalence*”, are the decrease in the regime of its functioning, which manifests in excessive concretization and rigidity in understanding psychic states; a belief that subjective representations absolutely accurately and univocally reflect reality as its photographic copies; non-admission of alternative interpretations, lack of ability to doubt the accuracy and limits of own thoughts; saturation of representations with affects of paranoid hostility, idealization and grandiosity [10].

In the optics of cultural-historical theory, the described group of phenomena appears as qualitatively heterogeneous: it includes phenomena, which pertain to various structural organizations and levels of regress of cognitive organization of consciousness; which differ in degree of differentiation and symbolic mediation, emotional and motivational investment and understanding of causal relations between one’s own and other people intentions and behavior. We suggest considering two possible variants of decreased level of mentalizing inside the phenomenon of psychic equivalence as the consequence of structural regression of all cognitive-affective system to syncret and complex. Thus, in the syncretic structure of mentalization shapelessness, diffuseness and disarray of various impressions from the graphic perception of the Self and the Other are domineering, fused into single perceptive image by a primitive affect; this image is very unstable and mutable under the influence of random impressions and immediate emotional states. We will refer here to the thought of L.S. Vygotsky, according to whom, the lack of objective relations in syncret is replaced by the surplus of subjective links, given in immediate perception and emotional impression [11]. In their ultimate pathological manifestations in mentalization-syncret, the psychic and the reality may not differ at all, they become equivalent to each other. Fantasies and illusions are easily projected outwards and taken for really existing objects, so that the state of anxiety is confused with the external threat and relived with all the force of physical impact. The ultimate forms of syncretic organization of mentalization refer to the most archaic layers of consciousness, when the “psychic” itself as the subjective has not been distinguished yet from the primary wholesome fusion in psychic representation of psyche-reality, when the structure of this whole is homogeneous, non-differentiated, which implies the absence of clear borders between the objective and the subjective, the real and the hallucinatory, weak distinction of psychological

borders of the Self and the Other, own fantasies, representations of the Other and real states of this Other.

The diffuse structure of mentalization domineers in the altered states of consciousness, in utter affective rapture, in PTSD shock as an immediate “switch-off” of the ability to comprehend a traumatic experience, in the process of poetic work; it is cultivated deliberately in some religious practices; in borderline personality organization it may indicate the psychotic level of disorder with reality testing impairment, weak discernment of borders between instinctive fantasies, hallucinations and reality, with some features of “magical thinking” in understanding causal links between own desires and impulses and intentionality of behavior of another person [12; 13]. The syncretic form of pre-mentalization may be understood as well as a consequence of decay of systemic organization of the psychic, as a regress in functioning of the whole system of consciousness to the most ontogenetically early, the “lowest” and the “primitive” level, which corresponds to the “natural” and pre-conceptual organization of the consciousness as a whole. In this regime of functioning the real and the imaginative, immediate perception of the “visual field”, sensory-motor cognition and primary affects exist in coalescence, in syncretic and non-differentiated unity of *experience*, when in consciousness the Self presents itself and the objective reality (and the Other) not as separate entities, different from own hallucinations, but as a fused and non-differentiated whole (“proto-We”, “one body, one soul for two”). This form of consciousness, following Vygotsky, we may assign to its “primordial”, pre-verbal form, “borderline” field between verbal consciousness and precognition, where in the undivided primitive whole consciousness and precognition are fused, “primal” and “secondary” processes may chaotically mix, and borders between them, even if marked, may be easily “penetrable”, affects are “fleeting”, non-selective in their choice of object of investment and are absolutely dependable on autochthonous instinctive stimulation and sensory-motor activity. On this level of mentalization, unconscious affective attitude “pro et contra” the Self and the Other is domineering; only the simplest “good and bad” structuring of consciousness, only basic trust/ distrust is available. Note that syncretic mentalization structure is widely produced in the modern cultural stereotypes, for example, in the belief that “thought is material”, and “one can read a person like a book”, in preference of symbiotic relationships. Inside the integral mentalization structure, syncret creates the resource of intuitive and sensual-emotional worldview.

The *complex mentalization structure*, as compared to syncretic structure, attests for the movement to more structure and differentiation of the psychic structure, for overcoming “incoherent linkedness” and chaos of syncretic forms of thinking [11]. The transition to unification and generalization, to integration of separate representations of the Self and the Other becomes possible not only on the basis of subjective relations and emotional impressions, but also on the basis of objective relations, upon experience of real interaction, which signifies the beginning of discovery of own subjectivity and the autonomous world of the other person. However, the complex structure of cognition imposes some restrictions on the opportunities of self-understanding, self-identifications and representations of one’s own and other person’s subjectivity. In terms of its complex organization, mentalization is limited to relations and links, which are determined directly in the practical-operative experience of interaction with the Other and on the basis of vivid-concrete and metaphorical thinking. The decrease of the level of mentalization to over-concreteness may also manifest in “excessive exactness” of the image of the Self and the Other, their equation to behavior in a definite limited situation of interaction and resulting from this situation affective “coloring”, and in this sense – to “equivalence”. Complex mentalization, because of its lack of generalization and “narrowing” of the meaning field, lacks structural stability: it may turn into diffusion, indefinite and chaotic heaping of separate representations-impressions of the Self and the Other. Further, it means dominance of situationally colored partial and concrete images, which functioning is determined by pragmatic motives and current moment, momentary interests and emotional states. Thus, complex mentalizations represent “borderline” formations – they are not syncretisms any more, but not concepts yet (“pseudo-concepts”), not generalized and abstracted from the concrete situation or an object, but sensually experienced separate qualities of the Self and the Other, important for realization of a concrete activity in concrete circumstances. One may say that the person, whose representations of the Self and the Others are organized in the type of complex, is excessively rooted in their existential and sensually experienced situation, too dependent on actual emotional states and pragmatic interests, can’t think the Other beyond one’s own intentional states, autonomously and in all the entirety of the inherent individual traits of the Other and their otherness. That is to say, *complex mentalization* of the Self and the Other is “tied” to a concrete situation and because of that is partial, paradoxically can be *both* rigid and mutable, is not differentiated enough from affects and perception, integrated on the basis of the pre-conceptual generalization, whereby it is cognitively simplified, narrowed and flattened, “alexithymic”. Along with that, such mentalization is “biased”,

contradictory, because of the lack of differentiation of the need states, “fusion” with them, and thus egocentric and susceptible to the “fleeting” emotional influences, one may say, *field-dependent* – both from the external concrete situation and from the inner impulses of the subject, who is “not free” from the environment and own affects, can’t rise above them [14]. For the functioning of complex mentalization, the utter field-dependency is common: narrowing of the possibilities to transcend the present, empirical, immediately given, including by way of creative transformation, imagination, dream, when one may only come close to the subjective world, but never be sure of its ultimate understanding. The lowering of the level of mentalization will hinder the anticipation of the future, metaphoric reconstruction of the missing, lost, and thus significantly lessens person’s resources for recovery, stabilizing the state of chronic “emotional hunger”, constant discontent and search for instant gratification of motives, fused with instinctive desires, in symbiotic relationships with the other as the only source of “emotional inflow”. Low differentiation and lack of means for reflexive analysis manifests in inability to notice subtle differences and conceive the Self and the Other in the process of development and change (especially in the sphere of social relationships and self-perception); in “dichotomy”, “non-dialecticity” of cognition as a whole and intolerance of epistemological uncertainty. In psychotherapy of “difficult” borderline and psychosomatic patients the abovementioned features of mentalization determine the psychological mechanism of generalized resistance to treatment, sabotage of cooperative relationships, and impose limitations to the patient’s ability to feel relief and at least partial satisfaction from the therapeutic analysis and support (as a verbal analogue to “containment”), compassion and supporting attitude of the Other with the help of **words**, but not **actions** and **“things”**.

Many authors working in psychodynamic model of object relations and in other frameworks noted mentalization deficit of borderline patients. Thus, according to some of them, one may regard the lack of availability of the symbolization and meaning-making processes as the main cognitive impairment in borderline and psychosomatic personality disorders [15; 16]. The consequence of this “basic defect” is the distinctive construction of the inner word, which is full of concrete events, but lacks “mentality” – thoughts, ideas, fantasies, associations and metaphors, meanings and emotional saturation [17; 18]. Besides all that, in light of this specific cognitive-emotional defect the well-known mentalizational “paucity” can be understood – cognitive non-differentiation of borderline and psychotic patients in psychological understanding of their and other people’s mental world. French psychoanalysts call their inherent way of thinking, understanding the world and attitude “operative thinking” [19], underlining

its narrowness and pragmatism; it's utterly simplified and static style of understanding the Self and the Other. Mentalization processes, based on complex thinking, are also lacking dynamic "flow" and flexibility in construal of affective life, which manifests in incomprehension of principal incompleteness of understanding the Other – the subject rejects the uncertainty of the situation of cognition, is intolerant to alternative variants of understanding the feelings and intentions of the Other, except those based on behavior and evident cause and effect relations. Mentalization, which is built on the basis of complex thinking, may be viewed as a *transitional* form, borderline in its structure and way of functioning between natural and cultural psychic function, which lacks symbolic mediation, awareness and arbitrariness.

3.2. Impairment of motivation, goal-directedness and sense-making function of mentalization

Peter Fonagy uses the term "pseudo-mentalization" (pretend, "as if", imagined mentalization) for the following diverse group of phenomena, underlining its ontogenetic proximity to early forms of child play, when fantasy is split off from the factual situation.

From our point of view, the phenomenon of pseudo-mentalization is linked to principal perversions of motivation and goal-directedness of the mentalization process, which arise exclusively in the situation of close and emotionally saturated interaction, and unconsciously create chaos, communicative dead-ends, double-binds, causing "narcissistic wounds" in personal communication and failures of therapeutic interventions [7; 20]. Such "impotency" of mentalizations becomes evident, when we trace how these pre-categorical primitive structures, which have syncretic and complex organization, manifest themselves in *movement*. The differences should show up in a wider context of communication, in opportunity of cooperation with the Other on the basis of mutual interest, trust, common motives and goals, "collective intentionality" [1] and emotional investment.

Exclusive focus on one's own autistic inner world and "absence" of the Other. By virtue of the "split-off" from empirical experience, mentalization is replaced by a lifeless, "devitalized", utterly schematized image, devoid of genuine depth and felt emotionality, having little to do with the Other in flesh and blood, present in relationships here-and-now. That said, inner implicit schemes, which reflect own desires, beliefs, a priori concepts, are subjectively so detached (to be exact – split off) from explicit, empirically observed, situational contextual concepts, that it seems that one doesn't

need real interaction with the other person – one knows well in advance, what this Other feels and thinks. Abstract constructions, autistic meanings and symbols take over the objects of reality as represented by the empirical Other as the living flesh of social cognition. While the complex character of mentalization reflects utter dependency from environment, and syncretic variant reflects complete merge with it (equivalence), in pseudo-mentalization, reality and subjectivity split off from each other so extremely that the subject lives in their inner, fictional reality absolutely reserved and “over-field-independently” from empirical reality of the Other. Psychological meaning of such “deviation” from the normal goal of mentalizing may be explained on the assumption of its unconscious function of defense from the meeting with indefinite and frightening reality of the inner world of another person, which threatens one’s consciousness with the appearance of traumatizing feelings for the vulnerable narcissistically grandiose Self, via their transformation with the help of over-idealization of the Self and devaluation of the Other. The lack of “outside perspective” and “detachment” of representative world from reality strips mentalization about oneself some sources of verification of this rigid “theoretical” constructions. In its extreme forms, pseudo-mentalization may be indicative of impairment of reality-testing, of altered state of consciousness, psychotic level of functioning. Affective dumbness, aloofness, intellectual decay, derangement of the whole behavior are structurally linked with disruption of social relations. The loss of social relations (interpsychic communication), non-mediated by the talk-dialogue with the Other, is interiorized in inner “muteness” – loss not only of understanding of others, but the disruption of meaningful inner and “verbalized” dialogue with oneself, self-understanding. With the collapse of efforts to live in the regime of pretence and failures to establish close interpersonal relationships, built on the basis of fictitious representations of the Self and the Other, unconscious search of defensive “refuge” in mysticism, religiosity, occultism and other paranormal cultural practices are possible, though they can’t fill inner emptiness of emotions and meanings.

The second type of distortion of mentalizational motivation is also associated with the displacement of its meaning and goal-directedness, but in this case in the “focus” of understanding the Self and the Other lie purely concrete, bodily, physiological or behavioral manifestations as *facts of reality*, and only they can serve as a ground for utterly simplified and “truncated” representations. In psychotherapy this effect is manifested in narrowing the possibilities for constructive change of inner mental representations and urgent demand from the therapist to present “effective” and “factual” proves of therapy efficiency, of his/her professionalism, sincerity, commitment and “love”, prompting (manipulating and forcing) violation of the therapeutic borders and

direct sexual actions. Patients with borderline personality disorder are satisfied with the results of the treatment only if they are certified with the external, perceptible, “material” and pragmatic changes in their life – immediately, “here-and-now”. They don’t trust words and feelings of the Other, but rely only on the visual facts and only when behavior of the other people meet completely their unrealistic infantile and perfectionist projects (rags-to-riches), dreams of love, beauty, glory, immediate transformation of looks or fate. Possibilities of mentalization as a symbolic way of representation (and accordingly – change) of subjective are extremely limited here; in its structural organization such a mentalization is close to syncretic and complex, pre-mentalization level. Its dysfunction is manifested in replacement of symbolization by impulsive behavioral or psychosomatic reacting (“acting out”), in immersion into bodily hypochondriac or perfectionist-narcissistic fixations, in self-harming behavior, and notably these actions and bodily states are not mediated by meaning, not expressed in word, and pre-verbal layers of consciousness-feeling are “split off” from the layer of meaning. Emotions that accompany representations of the Self and the Other are “alexithymic”, cognitively non-mediated, impulsive, intense and polarized.

The third variant of deviation of mentalizational motivation – mentalization abuse – is an unconscious use of mentalization for purposes of control or harming other person. This dysfunction becomes possible due to the lack of the feeling of subjectivity, detachment of mentalizational experience from values and normative representations about autonomous significance of the subjective world of the Other. The “inception” into thoughts and feelings of the Other via primitive defense mechanism of projective identification gives a clue to understanding the role of manipulation as communicative violence, which blocks mentalization processes. Chronification of psychological violence, for example in the form of manipulative style of parental attitude or school bullying, is interiorized in stable basic deficits of mentalization as psychological “armor” from subjectively unbearable traumatic experiences. It may be suggested further, that the loss of the ability to psychically imagine (and not mechanically act and stereotypically reproduce in memory) emotionally significant events, symbolically (and not via immediate reacting or all-potent control) “contain” and process psychological traumas, is the result of fragility of identity and lack of means and ways of inner autonomous and formed system of symbolic self-regulation. Mentalization via manipulation, which differs in level of its structural organization, in its way of functioning is closer to natural function, externally organized and wholly dependent on narcissistic mirroring view of the Other, “used” only for detoxication of hostility and compensation of deficit.

4. Conclusion

Let's formulate some interim results of the study of the problem. Mentalization of the mature person unfolds in its development to a more differentiated, elaborate, cognitively and symbolically mediated, affectively balanced representative system, able to organize and "withhold" contradictory and emotionally ambivalent experience of the "Self-Other" relationships. On the contrary, impairments of mentalizational structural-functional system are due to the mechanism of de-differentiation/ disintegration of representations of subjective world of the Self and the Other, prevailing and fusion of extremes of syncretic and diffuse "merges" of desires, affects and situations and / or complete split-off of over-abstract representations from sensually experienced reality of the human world.

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